

GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD

John 3: 16-21

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Today is World Communion Sunday. This tradition was started in 1933 by Hugh Thompson Kerr, former moderator of the Presbyterian General Assembly and pastor of the large Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh. In 1936 it was adopted by the entire Presbyterian denomination and then spread to other denominations. It was an attempt to bring churches together in Christian unity and above all, to let everyone know how important the Church of Jesus Christ is and how each congregation is interconnected with one another.

For years this first Sunday of October was known as Worldwide Communion, but a generation or more ago the word “wide” was dropped. I don’t know why that was, but perhaps it was a recognition that even though the Lord’s Supper is observed in churches around the world, there are still large areas of the world where there is no church, and several thousand people groups around the world where there are few if any believers in Christ.

The word “world” is used hundreds of times in the Bible and it has a variety of meanings. Sometimes it is referring to God’s creation, the physical earth. Most of the time it is referring to the people of God’s creation that inhabit the earth. Because sin entered the world, it has become a place where people are indifferent or hostile to God. The term world in the Bible then mostly refers to all of humankind who are in rebellion against God, ungodly people, the embodiment of sin. “Do not be conformed to the world,” wrote Paul in Romans 12:2, “but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.”

Jesus told his disciples, “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own, as it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you” (John 15:18-19). In the book of James we read, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (James 1:27). And further along we read, “You adulterous people, don’t you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God” (James 4:4).

In First John we read, “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever” (1 John 2:15-17).

These are ominous warnings, and there many similar warnings throughout the New Testament about worldliness and not being corrupted by the sins of the world. Does that mean then that true Christians are to withdraw from the world? Are real Christians to separate themselves into monasteries or convents, or like some did in the early Christian centuries, go out into the desert and live in a cave? Are churches supposed to become nice little closed communities of like-minded believers with locked doors to keep out the evil influences of a sinful world?

Absolutely not! For God loves the world. God loves the world so much that he sent his son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. We read in that familiar scripture from John 3. “Behold, the Lamb of God,” said John the Baptist, “who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Jesus said, “I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world” (John 12:47). Paul wrote to Timothy, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1Timothy 1:15).

If God so loved the world that he sent his only son to die upon a cross for the sins of the world, then what should our relationship be with this sinful world? The Bible is very clear about that. We are to be God’s witnesses, his agents of reconciliation in this world that is alienated from God. Jesus said, “go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation” (Mark 16:15). Before his ascension, Jesus told the disciples in that well-known verse, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

In another familiar scripture, Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us” (2 Corinthians 5:19-20). Those are our marching orders. We are Christ’s ambassadors. God is making his appeal to the world through us. We are the ones commissioned to show God’s love to the world. We are the ones charged with God’s mission in the world, to proclaim the gospel of salvation to a world that is in rebellion against God or following other gods.

We tend to think that the challenge to missions, to spreading the gospel to the world only begins in the New Testament, that the Old Testament is narrowly focused on Israel, and that the Jews, as God’s chosen people, were really not interested in anybody else.

But that is not true. For the story of God’s missionary purpose, his love for all the peoples of the world, and our role in spreading that love, begins in the very first book of the Bible, in the 12th chapter of Genesis. “The Lord had said to Abram, ‘Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land that I will show you.

‘I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you;
I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse;
And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.’”

Later, when Abraham demonstrated his obedience and faith by being willing to sacrifice his son Isaac, God told Abraham, “through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me” (Genesis 22:18). As followers of Christ, the Jewish Messiah, we are Abraham’s spiritual offspring. If God has promised to bless “all the families of the earth,” he has promised to do so “through Abraham’s seed.” Since we are Abraham’s seed by faith, the families of the earth will only be blessed if we go to them with the gospel. That is God’s plain purpose.

John R.W. Stott, one of the greatest Bible scholars of the last generation has written, “I pray that these words, ‘all the families of the earth,’ may be written on our hearts. It is this expression more than any other which reveals the living God of the Bible to be a missionary God. . . If our God is the God of ‘all the families of the earth’ we need to become global Christians with a global vision, for we have a global God.”

That is the message of Psalm 67, our opening scripture. “May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine on us—so that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations.”

In another article John Stott has written, “It is the Bible that has laid upon us the responsibility to evangelize the world, gives us the gospel to proclaim, tells us how to proclaim it, and promises us that is God’s power for salvation to every believer. It is, moreover, an observable fact of history, both past and contemporary, that the degree of the Church’s commitment to world evangelization is commensurate with the degree of its conviction about the authority of the Bible. Whenever Christians lose their confidence in the Bible, they also lose their zeal for evangelism. Conversely, when they are convinced about the Bible, then they are determined about evangelism.”

However, let us never think that mission is a duty. It is a privilege. Too often we focus on obedience, on the need to obey the Great Commission, to make disciples of all nations. This can lock us into a human-centered perspective. If we begin with a human-centered orientation, we can easily become discouraged, because the task is so far greater than we can fulfill. Tim Dearborn, from University Presbyterian, who was the Director of Global Engagement for World Vision, and taught at Fuller Seminary and Seattle Pacific, has written, “Mission is ultimately not a human response to human need. The Church’s involvement in mission is its privileged participation in the actions of the triune God.

“Lack of interest in mission is not fundamentally caused by an absence of compassion or commitment, nor by a lack of information or exhortation. It is best

remedied by intensifying our passion for Christ, so that the passions of Christ's heart become the passions that propel our hearts. It is insufficient to proclaim that the Church of God has a mission in the world. Rather, *the God of mission has a Church in the world*. Grasp this inversion of subject and object, and participation in God's mission will become a joyous, life-giving privilege. Miss it, and mission involvement will eventually degenerate into a wearisome, overwhelming duty. . . Mission was never intended to be an exhausting human enterprise. Mission is our privileged participation in the life-giving action of the triune God."

I can attest that mission is a joy and a privilege. You've probably heard me say this before, that I have been a pastor for 57 years, but this work in Nigeria these past 20 years has been the most joyous and rewarding of all my years as a pastor. It is God's mission in this world and participating with him in that mission is not a duty, it is a joyous privilege and an adventure of passion and hope.

Now all of this is preaching to the choir for many of you, if you have been around West Side for a few years. West Side has long had a strong emphasis on global mission. The first missionary our church sent out was Julia Stunkard, who sailed for China in 1931, 88 years ago. Since then there have been a steady stream of young adults who have gone to the mission field, either here in the US or abroad. That's how I became so interested and committed to missions, growing up here as a boy. Even though I felt a strong call to be a pastor, missions have always been a major emphasis of my ministry. Even as youth pastor at Bellevue Presbyterian back in the 60s, I was able to make local mission and global mission a high priority of that young church. I had a huge 9 ft. x 12 ft. map of the world covering one whole wall of my office. And in the 80s, my doctoral research and dissertation was on "Congregational Giving to Presbyterian Missions."

Eight of our current missionaries grew up here at West Side: Dorciane Toth, Larry Burke, Mike McLaughlin, Tom and Bernice Speckhardt, Rick Wood, and Tom and Debbie Wood. That is a wonderful legacy, but it is a tribute to a past generation, because all 8 of them are baby boomers. The youngest is 58 and the oldest is in her 70s. If I am not mistaken, we have not had a single young person from our church go into either local missions or global missions in at least the last 30 years.

We need to all make that a matter of prayer. In Matthew 9 Jesus was surrounded by the multitudes and he was moved to compassion because they were "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." Then he turned to the disciples, "the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." Jesus didn't say to pray for the lost. He said to pray for the church. His concern was that his followers would not go to the lost. The only possible explanation for how there can be such great need for the gospel in the world, yet so few workers is that we are not praying. So

let's really pray that God will raise up one or more young people from our church, from a new generation, who will answer the call to serve God on the mission field.

And what are some practical ways that all of us can be involved in furthering God's mission in the world? I've listed in the bulletin some practical things we could do. First would be to attend Missions Fest two weekends from now. This is a large missions conference with about 70 sponsoring churches including West Side. It will be at Crossroads Bible Church in Bellevue, Friday evening and Saturday, October 18-19. There will be outstanding plenary speakers, about 70 different seminars, and 80 mission agency exhibitors. It is a wonderful opportunity to learn and see what God is doing in the world, and maybe get some ideas about what you could do to become more of a world Christian.

Six years ago I preached a sermon based on a book entitled *Radical* by a brilliant young pastor, David Platt, who is now the head of the mission board of the Southern Baptist Convention, with thousands of overseas missionaries. He had what he called his Radical Experiment in the last chapter of his book. The fourth of the 5 points in his experiment was this:

Spend your time in another context. If we are going to accomplish the global purpose of God, it will not be primarily through giving our money, as important as that is. It will happen primarily through giving ourselves. Going, starts where we live, but it doesn't stop there. If there are billions who have not heard the gospel, then we have an obligation to go to them. This is not an option. So the fourth challenge in the Radical Experiment is to give some of your time to making the gospel known in a context outside your city. He suggests planning on dedicating 2 percent of your time to this task. That works out to one week in the next year that you will travel and take the gospel to another context in the world, either domestically or internationally.

One week out of your year to take the gospel to another context. Years ago, Bruce Larson, pastor of University Presbyterian, called it "Vacation with a Purpose." Most of us do take vacations and a lot of us travel on our vacations. Why not plan a "Vacation with a Purpose"?

For example, Lisa West is organizing a short-term mission trip for adults to the Dominican Republic probably in February. Our former members Vic and Leslie Trautwein head up an amazing ministry to 1800 at risk kids there. Our young people are going there next summer, as they have done 4 or 5 times in past years, but this is a chance for adults to have that experience. Talk to Lisa. Her phone number and email are in the bulletin.

One of the mission agencies West Side supports is the Outreach Foundation which supports dozens of Presbyterian missionaries and mission projects around the world. Marilyn Borst is one of their leaders and she and others lead about 8-10 short-term mission trips to various areas every year. Marilyn is the sister of Keith Tanis,

our bridge pastor a year ago. Sharon and I went with her and a small group of Presbyterians to Cuba 5 years ago. It was fascinating to see what God was doing in Cuba. I know they have trips to Ghana and Egypt in the spring, and Sharon and I are thinking of going with them to one of the “stans” in Central Asia in May. Their website is in the bulletin.

Would you consider hosting a couple of international students for Thanksgiving dinner or another meal? There are thousands of international students here in Seattle, and most of them never get in an American home or even get acquainted with Christians while they are here. Some of you know Dan Brannon who works with international students at Central and South Seattle Community Colleges and he would be happy to set you up with a couple of international students. I can give you his phone number (206-325-7397).

If you are not getting the email newsletters from our missionaries, let me know. I have a list of the email addresses of about 80 West Side folks to whom I forward the newsletters of our missionaries. If you are not on that list but would like but would like to be, let me know.

And we need some new people on the missions committee. Most of us on the missions committee are from that older generation and we would love to have some new people on the committee.

Our God is a missionary God. He loves this sinful world so much that he sent his only son. And he has asked us to participate with him in taking the gospel to all the peoples of the earth. Let us pray that God will send workers from West Side into the harvest. To repeat the words of John Stott: “ If our God is the God of ‘all the families of the earth’ we need to become global Christians with a global vision, for we have a global God.”